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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways that educators can develop a variety of school-based programs that can significantly reduce the threat of serious violence and disruptions. An effective technology of school safety, it states, begins with knowledge and understanding. The purpose of the paper is to outline the current state of knowledge about school-violence prevention. It looks at how data about school violence can contribute to an understanding of how violence might be prevented, and what types of strategies for violence prevention have been most effective and how they can be implemented. The paper proposes a comprehensive model of school-violence prevention having three components: (1) creation of a safe and responsive school climate; (2) early identification and early intervention for students at risk for violence; and (3) effective responses to school disruptions or crises. The paper concludes with a discussion of zero-tolerance policies, stating there is little or no evidence that such strategies have improved student behavior or made schools safer. Instead, the paper offers a new model of school discipline based on early intervention. (Contains 20 references and 3 tables.) (WFA)

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2000

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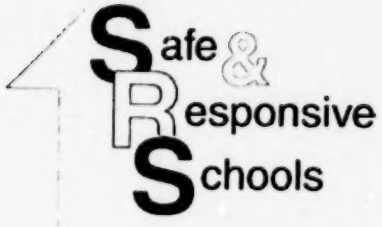

PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE:

A Practical Guide to Comprehensive Planning

Developed and published by
the Safe and Responsive Schools Project at the Indiana Education Policy Center

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PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE:

A Practical Guide to Comprehensive Planning

INTRODUCTION

In the last three years, incidents of dramatic and shocking violence have left teachers and students shaken, and nervous about the potential for violence at their own school. A rash of copycat threats in school districts throughout the nation, and the seeming normalcy of many of the shooters, has led to the inevitable but uncomfortable conclusion that serious violence could erupt anywhere, at any time.

These concerns lead to an increasing focus on preventing school violence. Should we implement prevention programs to improve school climate and teach students civility? Can we identify early warning signs before the eruption of violence? Is it necessary to rely on zero tolerance and increased use of suspension and expulsion in the face of school disruption, or are there other options? How can schools be prepared to cope with an event of school violence or crisis?

The message of this paper is that we *can* develop a variety of school-based programs that can significantly reduce the threat of serious violence and disruption. An effective technology of school safety begins with knowledge and understanding. The purpose of this paper is to outline the current state of knowledge about school violence prevention. First, how can data about school violence contribute to an understanding of how it might be prevented? Second, what types of strategies for violence prevention have been most effective, and how can they be implemented?

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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL VIOLENCE?

Overall, youth violence in the United States has increased at an alarming rate in the last fifteen years. Homicide has become the second leading cause of death for persons aged 15 to 24, and the leading cause of death for African-Americans in this age group. Between 1985 and 1994, annual arrest rates for weapons carrying for youth under 18 years of age increased 104%.[1]

Yet little of the violence reported for children and youth occurs in school; nor does national data show that the problem is getting worse.[2] Less than one percent of homicides and suicides among schoolchildren in the period from 1992 to 1994 were school-associated. With a school homicide rate of less than one in a million, the chances of violent death among juveniles are almost 40 times as great out of school as in school. While shocking and senseless shootings give the impression of dramatic increases in school-related violence, national surveys consistently find that school violence has stayed essentially stable or even decreased slightly over time (see next page for a listing of websites of some national reports on school violence).

Unfortunately, not all schools are equally safe. National-level data suggest that middle and high schools, especially larger schools, are more at-risk for serious violence. Moreover, students in urban schools serving predominantly lower socio-economic status (SES) minority children are twice as likely to be victims of violence as students in suburban, town, or rural areas. In addressing the tragic incidents that have occurred recently in suburban and rural schools, it is critical that the more ongoing and severe problems of lower SES urban schools and students not be forgotten or ignored.

Web Addresses on School Violence

National Center for Education Statistics
Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-1997.
http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/violence

US Department of Education
Annual Report on School Safety, October, 1998
http://www.ed.gov/pubs/AnnSchoolRept98/

USDOE
Early Warning, Timely Response
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html

National Center for Education Statistics
Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989 and 1995
http:/nces.ed.gov/pubs98/crime

Justice Policy Institute
School House Hype: School Shootings and the Real Risks Kids Face in America
http://www.cjcj.org/schoolreport.html

National Center for Education Statistics
Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998
http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/safety/

The Policy Making Partnership for Implementing IDEA
New IDEA 97 Regulations
http://www.ideapolicy.org

Thus, data on school violence data seem to fly in the face of teacher, student, and public opinion that school violence is extremely serious and getting worse. But while school shootings involving multiple victims are still extremely rare from a statistical standpoint, statistics are hardly reassuring, as long as the possibility exists that it could happen in *our* school, to *our* children. It is no doubt healthier that we seek to develop effective programs to prevent *any* death on school grounds than that we become accustomed to increasingly horrific levels of violence in our nation's schools.

Data on school violence may also lead to a surprising conclusion about the importance of day-to-day discipline. In one study of rural educators, a majority of teachers and administrators agreed that violence was worsening at

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their school.[3] But the behaviors they reported as escalating were not drugs, gangs, and weapons offenses, but rather behaviors indicating incivility—rumors and peer escalation of violent events, verbal intimidation and threats, pushing and shoving, and sexual harassment. Similarly, national surveys report that schools with fewer disciplinary problems in general also report fewer incidents of serious crime.

These findings have tremendously important implications, for they say that what we do in our schools on a day-to-day basis in terms of discipline may be related to serious crime and violence.

These findings have tremendously important implications, for they say that what we do in our schools on a day-to-day basis in terms of discipline may be related to serious crime and violence. By implementing comprehensive programs that improve overall school climate and reduce minor disruption, schools may be able to reduce the risk of more serious violent incidents.

ASSUMPTIONS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

These data on the relationship between "minor" discipline and incivility and serious violence provide the basis for one of the core assumptions of effective school violence prevention. Since day-to-day disruption and serious violence are in some way related, Indiana's schools must do all they can on a day-to-day basis to reduce the risk that minor incidents and disruptions will escalate into serious, life-threatening violence. In particular, this approach rests upon three assumptions or principles.

Violence is Preventable

Serious and dramatic incidents of violence seem frighteningly unpredictable, raising concerns about whether violence is indeed preventable. But prevention *can* make a difference. As an analogy, it is impossible to predict with certainty who will develop lung cancer, but on average, quitting smoking dramatically reduces the risk of lung cancer. In the same way, there is no guarantee that schools with the most comprehensive programs will be free of violence. But on average, schools that implement more components of violence prevention will likely see fewer incidents of disruption, and probably lower their chances of serious violence.

There is No Single Quick-Fix

In the wake of the Columbine tragedy, many schools have turned to metal detectors, or tough zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions, in the hope that a single strategy can protect schools from violence. Unfortunately, there is little or no data that any single strategy can keep our schools safe. Rather, the

most effective programs are comprehensive, applying an array of strategies to promote a safe school climate and respond to disruption.

Effective Prevention Requires Ongoing Planning and Commitment

School shootings throughout the country have provided a striking reminder that "it can happen here." There can be no room for complacency in maintaining the safety of our schools. Rather, effective programs promoting school safety require ongoing planning, commitment, and collaboration on the part of school staff, parents, and community members. If it takes a whole village to raise a child, it takes a commitment on the part of all villagers to planned coordination to ensure the safety of that child.

A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Nationally recognized researchers in the field of school violence have begun to look at what works and what doesn't in deterring school violence. Consistently, programs that effectively cut violence are proactive rather than reactive; involve families, students and the community; and include multiple components that can effectively address the complexity of school disruption and violence.[4] Indeed, preventive programs, such as bullying prevention, peer mediation, or anger management, have far more data available to support their effectiveness than do technology-based fixes such as metal detectors or video surveillance cameras.[5]

Comprehensive prevention can be highly effective in a surprisingly short period of time. In one inner-city school with rates of dropout approaching 70%-80% among minority youth, consultants worked with teachers, helping them increase their rates of praise and reframe classroom rules to be more positive. In one year, school suspensions dropped by 35%, and over the course of the three-year project, school dropout decreased by almost 40%.[6]

Recently, a comprehensive model of preventive discipline has begun to emerge as the model most likely to successfully address the complexity of emotional and behavioral problems in schools.[7] The approach, grounded in the belief that there is no single solution to school violence, prescribes intervention at three levels: *I. Creating a Safe and Responsive School Climate, II. Early Identification and Intervention, and III. Effective Responses to Disruption and Crisis*. Each of these three components is described in the pages that follow, along with model strategies in each area.

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I. Creating a Safe and Responsive School Climate

In order to promote a safe and responsive climate for all students, primary prevention efforts, such as conflict resolution or improved classroom management, are implemented school-wide. As the old adage "A rising tide lifts all boats" suggests, such efforts can be beneficial for both the general student population, and for those students more at-risk of violence. Such programs include violence prevention and conflict resolution curricula, peer mediation programs, and improved classroom behavior management.

Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention Curricula

In the face of a culture of violence in our society, many schools have begun to consider making violence prevention and conflict resolution part of their curricula. Such programs rely on ongoing instruction and discussion to change the perceptions, attitudes, and skills of students. A number of these curricula have become available since the mid 1980's, including conflict resolution, violence prevention, and social problem-solving. These curricular approaches are typically integrated into a broader program, often including components such as peer mediation, cooperative learning, school-wide behavior management programs, or anger management.

A number of conflict resolution or violence curricula have documented promising changes in student attitude and behavior. Whole school efforts, like the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, are associated with a number of positive outcomes, including teacher reports of decreases in physical violence and increased student cooperation, and reduced suspension and dropout rates. Consistency and commitment are highly important; students appear to show favorable outcomes in direct relationship to how often the curriculum is taught.[8]

Increasing the chances of success for conflict resolution/violence prevention curricula requires attention to a number of planning

and training issues. First, since there are only a limited number of curricula, it is important to carefully examine each curriculum to make sure it meets the needs of students in our district: Is the material appropriate for students in our type of geographic area? Is the material and presentation style age-appropriate? Second, conflict resolution and violence prevention curricula require teachers to implement a variety of instructional approaches, including modeling, discussion, videotape and roleplay. Before implementation, staff should understand the time and effort involved, and be trained adequately in the proposed curriculum, in order to ensure commitment to a level of instruction that will be effective in changing student attitudes and behavior.

Peer Mediation

In peer mediation, a cadre of student mediators are taught an interest-based negotiation procedure, along with communication and problem-solving strategies, to help peers settle disagreement without confrontation or violence. Students come to mediation voluntarily, and are guided by peer mediators to move from blaming each other to devising solutions acceptable to all parties. While some peer mediation programs mediate only in informal situations, such as the playground, others bring peer mediators into the classroom to help resolve student disputes. Peer mediation is most often implemented as part of a broader conflict resolution program.

A wide variety of studies have found peer mediation to be a promising strategy for improving school climate over time.[9] The use of peer mediation can substantially change how students approach and settle conflicts: students involved in peer mediation often express a greater willingness to help friends avoid fights and solve problems, and are less likely to believe that certain individuals deserve to be "beaten up." There is also evidence that implementing peer mediation programs can be associated with reductions in fights, office referrals, and school suspensions. Finally, for the mediators themselves, learning the mediation process has been shown to increase self-esteem, and even improve academic achievement.

Yet peer mediation is a complex undertaking; success in implementing peer mediation depends in large part on the adequacy of planning, training, and monitoring of the program. A number of logistical decisions must be made before beginning a peer mediation program: Which students will be eligible to be mediators, and how will they be chosen?; where and when will mediation occur? To deal with these and other logistical

issues it is probably necessary that there be a facilitator or school team assigned responsibility for planning and implementation. In addition, training student mediators in the assumptions and processes of peer mediation is critical; it has been estimated that initial training of peer mediators requires at least a 12-15 hour commitment. Finally, even after peer mediation has been established, ongoing monitoring of the program is essential. Thus, successful programs include weekly or bi-weekly meetings with student mediators to provide ongoing training, and ensure that mediators continue to be enthusiastic and effective. With adequate attention to the details of planning, training, and follow-up, and implemented as part of a broader school-wide program of violence prevention, peer mediation appears to be a promising tool that can help teach students methods to settle their conflicts without resorting to violence.

Improved Classroom Behavior Management

While some incidents of serious violence seem to "come out of nowhere," most incidents of school violence or serious disruption start as less serious behavior that accelerate to the point of requiring attention. Many aggressive or disruptive behaviors spiraling out of control might have been defused by early and appropriate responses at the classroom level.

Thirty years of study have resulted in a well-documented knowledge base regarding what works to prevent escalation of misbehavior at the classroom level.[10] In the last ten years, a number of package programs have become available integrating those findings into accessible and user-friendly classroom management packages. While the programs differ in their emphases, all tend to focus to some degree on the following principles of effective classroom management:

1. *Multiple options:* Effective classrooms rely on an array of strategies (see Table 1 for examples), that use both classroom structure (e.g., organized layout of desks to facilitate movement, well-paced lessons), and management responses (e.g., praising appropriate behavior) to maintain an effective learning environment.
2. *Emphasize the positive:* As noted above, making classroom and school environments more positive and welcoming can be a powerful intervention to increase student connectedness.
3. *Teach responsibility:* The goal of classroom behavior management strategies is not simply to control student behavior, but rather to

Table 1. Strategies for Preventing Behavioral Escalation[a]

Prevention

- Lively and interesting activities
- Meaningful tasks
- Make rules and procedures clear
- Variety
- Humor and enthusiasm

Nonverbal Cues

- Make eye contact
- Proximity (moving close to a student)
- Light hand on shoulder

Praising Correct Behavior Incompatible with Misbehavior

- "Catch 'em being good"

Praising Other Students

- Ignore misbehavior
- Praise the behavior you're hoping for
- Praise others whose behavior changes

Verbal Reminders

- Give reminders immediately after misbehavior
- State what students should do
- Focus on the behavior not the student

Repeated Reminders

- Response to "testing"
- "Broken record strategy"
- Avoid argument

Applying Consequences

- Remove from activity, lose privilege
- "Broken record strategy"
- Mildly unpleasant, short in duration, immediate
- Certainty more important than severity
- Followthrough, then let it go

[a] Adapted from Slavin, R. E. (1994). *Educational Psychology: Theory and Practice*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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help students develop self-control and responsibility. Thus any classroom management strategy might be viewed as much as instruction in social interaction, as control of misbehavior.

4. *Non-emotionality:* It is difficult for any of us to maintain a sense of calm in the face of aggression and disruption. Yet angry or emotional responses on the part of teachers or administrators simply feed a cycle of escalation. Effective classroom management packages provide a system of responses that help school personnel decelerate rather than accelerate emotional conflict.
5. *Consistency:* Classroom management is really about teaching students what are and are not appropriate ways to behave in the school and classroom. Students learn those lessons best if classroom management procedures are consistent both within and across classrooms.
6. *Early responses:* Ignoring misbehavior gives students the message that posted rules are not really in effect. While it is not necessary to treat all infractions severely, it is necessary to let students know, through consequences appropriately geared to infractions, that the rules of the school and classroom do have meaning and will be enforced.

School-wide classroom behavior management programs have been effective in decreasing suspension, expulsion, and dropout, reducing teacher burnout, and improving student on-task behavior and academic achievement. Effective classroom management programs require commitment and perseverance, however. Student misbehavior may escalate with the introduction of a new system, as students "test the limits." Yet most teachers and schools find that the additional time needed to prevent or de-escalate classroom disruption is more than made up by the savings in time from fewer office referrals and the overall improvements in school climate.

Bullying Prevention

The fact that many of the school shooters of the last three years had in fact been persecuted or picked on by their peers highlights the importance of attending to bullying in schools. Bullying is prevalent in schools—almost one-third of elementary students, and about 10% of secondary students report being bullied. Yet studies have found that school personnel commonly underestimate the extent of bullying present in their school compared to students; students are also often concerned that no action will be taken if they do report bullying.[11]

Individual level interventions do not appear to be sufficient to bring bullying under control. Rather, a whole school effort may be necessary, including interventions at the school, class, and individual levels. First, such programs raise the awareness of teachers, parents, and students about bullying through discussion, programs, and even videos. Second, school and classroom policies against bullying that are enforced send a clear message that bullying is not acceptable behavior. Increasing adult supervision in areas where monitoring is low appears to be effective, since the majority of bullying incidents occur in these areas. Finally, individual interventions such as assertiveness training for victims or counseling for both bullies and their victims appear to resolve a large percentage of such incidents.[12]

The difficulty in implementing effective programs to deter harassment and persecution is not one of knowledge; there are abundant studies that have shown that schools with a commitment to bullying prevention are able to reduce its occurrence. Rather the problem may be one of awareness and attitude. For bullying prevention to take hold, students, parents, and teachers need to come to an awareness that victimization of some students by others is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. With such awareness, and a school and community commitment, such multi-component approaches appear to be able to both reduce bullying and improve school climate.

II. Early Identification and Early Intervention for Students At-Risk for Violence

In most of the multiple victim school shootings of recent years, signs of trouble were evident that were to some extent overlooked. These incidents provide a wakeup call concerning the critical importance of procedures for detecting early warning signs of violence, and providing assistance to students who may be at-risk for violence. In an era where threats of violence among students have become almost commonplace, teachers and administrators need to be aware of the early warning signs of violence, and school procedures must be in place to respond to threats. Just as important, however, are school-wide screening procedures and mentoring or counseling programs that enable schools to identify and provide support to alienated or at-risk youth.

Early Warning Signs

Extensive research has identified a number of warning signs for violence and disruption that may assist schools in knowing which students need support, and when to take action. In the wake of the Springfield, Oregon school shooting in 1998, the White House directed the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice to develop a guide to schools and communities, entitled *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools.*[13]

> Such signs may or may not indicate a serious problem—they do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward self or others. Rather, early warning signs provide us with the impetus to check out our concerns and address the child's needs. Early warning signs allow us to act responsibly by getting help for the child before problems escalate.
>
> (*Early Warning, Timely Response*, p. 6)

The early warning signs included in that guide are presented in Table 2. These signs include some acting-out and disruptive behaviors that typically receive the most attention in schools. But it is also important to note that a number of the warning signs identify students who are socially withdrawn, iso-

Table 2. Early Warning Signs Listed in Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools

Sign	Description
Social withdrawal	Gradual or complete withdrawal from social contacts, stemming from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence
Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone	In some cases, feelings of isolation and lack of friends are a risk factor for aggression and violence.
Excessive feelings of rejection	Children who are troubled often are isolated from their peers, without support, may be at-risk for expressing their emotional distress in violence.
Being a victim of violence	Victims of violence-including physical or sexual abuse—are sometimes at risk of themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others
Feelings of being picked on and persecuted	Being picked on, teased, bullied, ridiculed, and humiliated may cause a child to withdraw socially, and without adequate support, to eventually vent these feelings through aggression or violence.
Low school interest; poor academic performance	When a low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated, acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur.
Expression of violence in writings and drawings	An overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings directed at specific individuals (family members, peers, teachers) over time.
Uncontrolled anger	Anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others.
Impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, bullying	Some mildly aggressive behaviors such as hitting and bullying common in early childhood may, if left unattended, escalate into more serious behaviors
History of discipline problems	Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems in school and at home may suggest unmet emotional needs, setting the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.
Past history of violent and aggressive behavior	Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth with a history of aggressive and violent behavior directed toward other individuals. Youth with an early pattern of frequent antisocial behavior across multiple settings are particularly at risk.
Intolerance for differences, and prejudicial attitudes	Intense prejudice based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation or physical appearance; membership in hate groups or a willingness to victimize those with disabilities or health problems.
Drug use and alcohol use	Drug use and alcohol use reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, as victims, or both
Affiliation with gangs	Gangs that support anti-social values and behaviors—including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students—cause fear and stress among other students.
Serious threats of violence	One of the most reliable indicators of a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

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lated and rejected, and may themselves have been picked on, bullied, or persecuted. Most of the school shootings of the last three years have, in fact, been perpetrated by such withdrawn and alienated youth.

While an increased awareness of risk factors for violence can be helpful to schools and families, several important cautions must be borne in mind. First, it is important that the warning signs not be used as a rationale for punishment or exclusion, or to label or stereotype students. Rather, the intent is to get early help to a child at-risk for disruptive or violent behavior. Further, it is important to understand the complexity of children's behavior and development. Since students at-risk for serious aggression or violence typically exhibit more than one warning sign, it is important not to overreact to any single incident or behavior. Finally, warning signs should always be understood within an appropriate developmental context and with common sense. What is a warning sign at one grade level may be more typical of students at another age. Carrying a knife to school is indeed a serious infraction and banned by the Gun-Free Schools Act; but it is unclear whether suspending or expelling students for articles such as nailfiles makes an important contribution to school safety. Early warning signs are most helpful if they are interpreted as part of a serious pattern that may worsen over time, and used to provide support for students as early as possible.

Responding to Threat

In the wake of nationally publicized school shootings, schools have become sadly familiar with threats of violence. A survey of Indiana school superintendents in June of 1999 found 136 copycat bomb threats in the state in the six weeks after the Columbine shooting. These data are a striking reminder that there are many emotionally at-risk students in our schools who might go to great lengths to make their needs known. In such a climate, schools must be prepared with clear policies that outline roles and actions in response to threats of school violence.

Such a plan should be available and well-publicized in advance of threats, and should include attention to both a chain of communication and actions to be taken. Building- or district-specific policies will vary, but should at the very least include the following components:

- *Reporting of threats by students:* Students need to understand that it is in their best interest to report threats to adults. In order to ensure that there is always

someone available that students trust, a variety of options (e.g., favorite teacher, guidance counselor, coach, parent, administrator) should be offered as individuals with whom students can share their concerns. Students may need some guidance and discussion concerning what constitutes a reportable threat or warning sign, and must be assured they will be protected from retribution for their report.

- *Taking threats seriously:* School and community dialogue should emphasize that parents and teachers cannot afford to dismiss certain reports, but need to forward all reports to school administration, and perhaps local law enforcement. Students may feel they are putting themselves at some risk by reporting; if there is no response to a serious report, both reporters and their peers will be less likely to communicate future incidents.
- *Pre-planned responses:* The time to decide what action to take in response to a threat is well in advance, not in the chaotic time after a threat. School psychologists or local mental health centers might be called upon to conduct a threat assessment. In some cases, suspension or expulsion may be conditional: that is, the return to school of a student making a serious threat is conditioned on the completion of a risk or threat assessment. Whatever the policy, it should be planned, written, and communicated to all staff in advance, to avoid panic in a threat situation.
- *Relationships with local law enforcement and mental health agencies:* Some threats, especially those involving possession of a firearm, require contact with local law enforcement officials. In all cases, however, a well-established relationship with the local police department and mental health agencies that allows clear and open communication regarding any threat is extremely helpful. Who will make the report, and to whom? Further information on collaboration of education, law enforcement, and mental health agencies is presented below in the section on *Crisis Intervention*.

In summary, threats against students, teachers, or school property must be taken seriously. Students must know that they are safe making reports, those reports must be acted upon, and policies and procedures must be planned and communicated to all staff well in advance of threats.

Risk Assessment and School-Wide Screening

When early or imminent warning signs or threats are detected,

team-based procedures should be in place to assess the seriousness of those signs or threats. Guides for implementing early warning signs recommend a core consultation team that includes mental health professionals. The school psychologist or other members of the team can evaluate the seriousness of behavioral or emotional warning signs through interviews with the student, consultation with those who know the child, and standardized measures of emotional and behavioral functioning. In evaluating early warning signs, collaboration with teachers, staff, and parents is important, especially in developing appropriate intervention strategies. In the case of imminent warning signs or threats, more expedited decisions may require a smaller group of decision-makers; but even here, close communication with community mental health, child service agencies, law enforcement and parents will yield more appropriate and well-considered decisions.

The sheer number of threats made against schools may also argue for a more proactive approach to the early identification of students. Commercially-available school-wide screening measures (e.g. *Systematic Screening for Behavioral Disorders*[14]) may provide schools a valuable tool for early identification of students in need, and another method for identifying at-risk students before their behavior escalates into disruption or violence. These systems use a variety of rankings, ratings, and observation to identify students with emotional and behavioral needs who may need intervention or support.

Finally, some schools are beginning to consider using school disciplinary code violations as an index to better identify and support students in need of behavioral or emotional assistance. In this type of system, a certain number or type of disciplinary infractions might be considered a flag that would trigger a team consultation or the development of an individual plan. One major advantage of this approach is that it uses data already available at most schools. Yet the sheer complexity of the school discipline process suggests that such systems be used with caution.[15]

Early Intervention: Mentoring and Counseling

In using early warning signs or screening procedures, identification is only half the battle; there must also be programs in place that can help reconnect students identified as at-risk for violence. Both mentoring and counseling can provide structures that allow us to rebuild those connections.

In mentoring, a supportive one-to-one relationship is structured

between an adult or older peer to provide support and guidance for an at-risk student. The mentor and the child typically meet one to two times a week and engage in a variety of activities including tutoring, discussion, field trips, or community service. As important as any activity, however, is the opportunity for the at-risk student to develop a trusting relationship with an adult. The most comprehensive program of mentoring is Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America; national evaluations have shown it to be a highly promising program for addressing issues of school violence. A number of other school- or community-based programs have documented decreases in students' violent attitudes, gains in self-esteem and career aspirations, and improved social skills and academic achievement.[16]

Several components are essential in developing an effective mentoring program. Clearly, there can be no effective mentoring without quality mentors: the selection of committed and responsible mentors must be assured, as well as training in working with difficult students. Mentoring requires a long-term commitment; some programs have reported that a relationship of at least a year must be in place before significant changes can be observed. Ongoing meetings among mentors can provide support and evaluation, assisting mentors in solving problems that may arise. Finally, although solely school-based mentoring programs are possible, involving both parents and the community in mentoring appears to increase the success of the program.

A closely related intervention, counseling, has been widely recommended during the national discussion on school violence. Yet the success of counseling appears to be highly variable, depending upon the type of problem being addressed. For students experiencing depression, cognitive-behavioral group counseling approaches have been shown to be quite effective over a relatively short time period. For students with acting-out or antisocial behavior, counseling is unlikely to be effective, and placing such students together in a group counseling situation may, in fact, make the problem worse.[17]

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing schools in the implementation of effective counseling programs is to ensure that there are mental health professionals with sufficient time available to engage in counseling. If school psychologists are engaged primarily in assessment activities, and school counselors in guidance functions, these professionals will simply not have time to develop effective

counseling relationships with at-risk students. For counseling to be an effective component in school violence prevention, additional time must be found for mental health professionals to engage in counseling. This might be accomplished either by hiring additional psychologists, counselors, or school social workers, or by reallocating time of existing personnel so that mental health professionals are able to spend a greater proportion of their effort in developing preventive mental health programs.

III. Effective Responses to School Disruption or Crisis

Despite our best efforts, it is likely that there will always be some level of disruption and perhaps even violence requiring an appropriate response. Schools that are safe and responsive have plans and procedures in place to deal with violent and disruptive behaviors that do occur. Over-reliance on suspension and expulsion is replaced by an extensive array of options that can be matched to the severity of the offense. In particular, well-prepared schools and districts have in place crisis intervention plans that detail the roles and procedures used to respond to crisis events.

Is Zero Tolerance an Effective Response?

Recent national events, such as the two year expulsion of eight students for fighting in Decatur, Illinois, have thrust zero tolerance school discipline policies into the national spotlight. Zero tolerance has gained wide popularity among politicians and many administrators for its promise of a no-nonsense solution to a difficult problem.

Yet the application of zero tolerance policies have created controversy at the state and national level.[18] Some districts supporting a zero tolerance approach have reported initial increases in weapons confiscated. Yet at the same time, strict application of zero tolerance has led to numerous cases of suspension or expulsion for everything from paper clips to organic cough drops, Midol, or homework completion.

The zero tolerance approach has also led to increases in the use of school suspension and expulsion. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that suspension and expulsion are effective in changing student behavior or improving school safety. Despite a widespread perception that suspension and expulsion are reserved for serious incidents, those consequences are often used indiscriminately. In 1997-98, only about 4% of the suspensions and expulsions in Indiana were in response to serious disruptions. Moreover,

exclusionary approaches tend to be used inconsistently. One researcher concluded that students wishing to reduce their rates of suspension would do better changing schools than improving their behavior or attitudes. Of serious concern is the racial and economic bias that often seems to accompany the use of suspension and expulsion: African-Americans have typically been found to be suspended at a rate two to three times that of other students, and are sometimes punished more severely for less severe behavior. Finally, while there are few data on the short-term effectiveness of suspension, in the long term, it is associated with higher rates of school dropout.

The message of zero tolerance is politically appealing, giving parents and communities the perception that schools are being tough on crime. While there are undoubtedly situations in which removing a child from school is necessary for that child or others' safety, at present we have no evidence that punishment and exclusion can in and of themselves solve problems of school violence, or teach students alternatives to violence.

Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion: An Array of Disciplinary Options

If we are to break the cycle of violence in American society, we must begin to look beyond a program of stiffer consequences to an array of effective responses geared toward the seriousness of the offense. A number of such alternative responses might be made available:

- *In-school disciplinary alternatives:* Saturday school or in-school suspension keep students in school while being disciplined. The effectiveness of in-school suspension seems to depend on its implementation; programs with a well-trained supervisor that require students to continue their academic assignments are more likely to be effective.
- *Restitution:* Restitution involves "setting things right" and is typically geared to the nature of the offense. Thus, vandals might be expected to clean up the vandalism, or perhaps even participate in a project to improve the physical environment.
- *Anger management:* Aggressive students often lack self-control in social situations, perceiving the actions of others to be more hostile than they really are. Anger management classes or programs help aggressive students change their perceptions and learn alternative behaviors in conflict situations.
- *Individual behavior plans:* In functional assessment, school

psychologists or special education consultants use interviews, checklists, and observation to better understand the reasons for disruptive behavior, and develop a specific plan to address the behaviors of concern. Under the most recent revision of special education law, schools are responsible for conducting functional behavioral assessments and developing individual behavior plans for special education students in danger of a change in placement as a result of their behavior. While required for some special education students, the technology of functional assessment and individual behavior plans may provide a useful tool as well for dealing with the most difficult and problematic youngsters, whether disabled or non-disabled.

- *Alternative disciplinary methods:* To shift the burden of discipline from administrators, some schools have developed alternative strategies or procedures for determining or assigning disciplinary consequences. *Teen court* uses a panel of students to hear disciplinary infractions and assign consequences. In *restorative justice*, students who have harmed another student are forced to face their victim and confront their action, with the goal being to engage in actions that restore a *sense of justice*.
- *Alternative settings:* Some students problems may be so severe as to require an alternative setting in which to continue their education for some period of time. Well-planned and coordinated alternative schools may meet the needs of some students. Referral to special education may also provide some students with the more structured environment that they require.
- *Community team approaches:* The problems of disruptive and violent youth are often highly complex, cutting across school, family, and the community. Thus, for the most severe cases, it is critical that child serving agencies—education, mental health, welfare, and law enforcement—act in concert. Recently, interagency approaches such as *wraparound teams* have become more widely used, increasing the communication and collaboration of child-serving agencies, and allowing them to develop comprehensive community-based plans for disruptive youth and their families.

It may well be that suspension and expulsion are often overused because there is simply no other alternative available. Developing an array of options for dealing with disruptive or violent behavior may reduce the need for suspension and expulsion, while at the same

time keeping more students present and engaged in school.

Crisis Intervention and Management

Watching many schools and districts be overwhelmed by the tragedies played out in living rooms throughout America in the last two years has led many administrators to wonder how their own school and district would react in the face of a crisis or strategy. The overwhelming conclusion reached by those who have lived through such a situation, and those who consider such possibilities carefully, is that planning is better than panic. All personnel and agencies must be prepared to respond in the face of crisis, must communicate that knowledge to all stakeholders, and must be prepared to deal with the aftermath of tragedy. In recent school firearm incidents at the national level, quick thinking by well-trained school safety coordinators may have prevented serious tragedy or loss of life.[20] Three important components of planning for and responding to crisis should be kept in mind.

First, a well-developed crisis intervention plan is essential. The plan must specify the members and roles of the crisis response team, and describe training and communication. All staff must know all codes signaling emergencies, and be clear about what course of action to take in response to each type of announcement. Communication systems should be checked beforehand to ensure that all staff will receive notice of emergency announcements. Contacts with local law enforcement and mental health, the process by which those contacts must be made, and the roles of each agency during the crisis must all be pre-identified. Since crisis events can also spark rumor and misinformation, the plan should specify how facts about the incident will be gathered and reported. A well-developed plan must also specify actions to manage the media; where will they be stationed? who will speak with the media? how will students and parents be protected from unnecessary intrusions?

Just as importantly, the plan must be communicated: even the best of plans provide no protection if they simply languish on a shelf. All plans must be *action plans* that include a schedule of staff training, plans for communication with parents, and a schedule of ongoing meetings and communication among responsible community agencies. It is important to resolve the question of drill as part of the planning process; while some may argue that drills in crisis management seem to simply alarm students, others note that practice vastly decreases the likelihood of

panic. What is important, however, is that the school safety team come to a considered decision on school crisis drills that reflects the needs of the school and community. Communication of the plan to students is another area requiring careful consideration. Revealing all communication codes obviously reduces their effectiveness in an emergency; on the other extreme, failing to have adequately communicated crisis plans to students may leave them confused and panicky in an emergency.

Finally, a crisis plan is not complete without planning for the aftermath of a crisis. An adequate plan takes into account the highly-charged nature of crisis, and plans for mental health services to meet the needs of victims, their families, and their friends. Which school mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers) or community mental health agencies will be responsible for grief or trauma counseling? How will counseling be made available to students, staff, or parents? How will the facts of the situation be communicated to parents and the community? Crisis planning resources typically provide sample forms for communicating about a crisis event; having letters, procedures, and sample press notices pre-planned and on file will make it more likely that communication about a crisis event will be thoughtful and compassionate, not inflammatory.

CONCLUSION: ZERO TOLERANCE VS. EARLY RESPONSE

Heart-wrenching tragedies and numerous copycat threats in schools across our nation have taught two important lessons in preventing school violence. First, ***it can happen here***. School violence is not restricted by economic or geographic status; all schools and communities are vulnerable, and all must be prepared. Second, ***there is no quick-fix solution for school violence***. Politically popular zero tolerance approaches may in the short term give parents and communities the impression of a "no-nonsense" response to violence, but there is little or no evidence that those strategies have improved student behavior or made schools safer.

As an alternative rhetoric, we suggest that schools and school districts interested in effective and comprehensive violence prevention shift away from ***zero tolerance*** to what might be termed ***early intervention*** school discipline policies (see Table 3). Like zero tolerance, an early response strategy assumes that early intervention for school disruption is critically important; left unattended or ignored, minor disruption often escalates into more serious disruption or even violence. Unlike zero tolerance, however, the alternative does not assume that immediate intervention must be harsh and punitive. Rather, early intervention seeks to decrease the possibility of violence by creating a positive school climate, and by reconnecting those students most at-risk for committing violent acts, and by an array of effective consequences scaled to the severity of the offense.

Developing safe and responsive schools requires the close collaboration of schools, agencies, parents, and students themselves. For too long, we have expected school personnel alone to solve problems of disruption and violence in the

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school. Yet the most difficult problems, and the most difficult students, are far too complex for any one agency to manage successfully. Rather, strong and effective connections must be forged between schools and mental health, law enforcement, and social welfare agencies to address the multiple needs of students at-risk of violence. Similarly, involving parents in all stages of planning and response to school violence will vastly increase the resources available to schools, and increase the consistency of our interventions across home and school. Finally, it is critical that students be provided with opportunities to contribute to dialogue and planning for safe

Table 3. Toward a New Model of School Discipline: Zero Tolerance vs. Early Response

	Zero Tolerance	Early Response
Timing	Respond to all misbehavior with immediate consequence, to "teach disruptive students a lesson"	Respond to each misbehavior early in the sequence. Attempt to prevent misbehavior through improved school climate and early identification.
Response	Severe, often involving suspension and expulsion	Array of responses geared to seriousness of behavior
Purpose	Reassert authority, punish	Teach alternatives to violent and aggressive responses
Outcome	Confrontation, exclusion	Decelerate disruptive behavior and maintain effective learning climate
Scope	Reactive: Attempting to re-establish order	Comprehensive and proactive; involve parents, students, community
Strategies	Suspension, expulsion, school security technology	Wide range of strategies targeting school climate, early identification, effective responses
Effectiveness	No data	Some – good data. More data needed.

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schools. Student perspectives on conflict and violence are often far different than the perspectives held by school personnel; if students are expected to assist in the identification of their potentially violent peers, it will probably be important to listen to their views on how to ensure their involvement.

Our schools have made good progress in preparing students academically to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. Yet the best instructional systems will be for naught if we cannot ensure our children's safety, or teach them how to live and work together civilly. The development of safe and responsive schools requires a comprehensive and long-term planning process, an array of effective strategies, and a partnership of school, family, and community. Unfortunately, there is no way to guarantee that a school will not experience serious disruption or violence, even with an extensive plan. Yet in the face of deadly violence that could threaten our school and community at any time, we have little choice but to direct our energy into preventive planning that can increase the probability that our schools will be safe and violence-free.

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